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SUBJECT: FRANCE/LEBANON: TO DAMASCUS AND BEYOND

REF: A. (A) GMP20070718825001

¶B. (B) PARIS 03062

Classified By: DCM Mark Pekala for reasons 1.4. (b) and (d)

¶11. (U) The unexpected July 17 visit to Damascus by French envoy for Lebanon Jean-Claude Cousseran has for the past couple of days vied with news about an expected imminent visit to Libya by President Sarkozy in connection with the "Bulgarian medics" case as the top international story. This was to be expected, since the French MFA had refused official comment even as word was leaking out that Cousseran was en route to or already in Damascus. His visit to Damascus, the first by a "high-level" French official in nearly three years, has sparked debate about the French gameplan for Lebanon given Paris' longstanding publicly stated determination under President Chirac to exclude the Syrians as much as possible from the Lebanese political equation.

¶12. (C) For whatever reason -- perhaps because the desk officers did not feel they had discretion to share with others -- the MFA told us flatly, at almost the same time his plane was touching down there, that Cousseran was not traveling to Damascus. In a meeting July 17 to discuss the recent gathering of Lebanese political factions in Celle Saint-Cloud, the Lebanon and Syria desk officers talked as if the debate was still playing out at senior levels of the French government. Both acknowledged the risk that, by going to Damascus, France would inadvertently make Syria a player in the process of choosing the next Lebanese president. They claimed the GOF was fully aware of the unhappy precedent of 1988 when U.S. attempts to help the Lebanese narrow the list of candidates to succeed Amine Gemayel resulted in deadlock over the single candidate demanded by Syria and Gemayel's subsequent contested appointment of Michel Aoun as prime minister with full executive authority. The desk officers further claimed that

internal division in Syria over the merits of engaging with the French was hampering the French in their efforts to arrive at a decision.

¶13. (C) The Syria desk officer received a phone call from the French ambassador in Damascus during our conversation. His colleague on the Lebanon desk kept talking so that we would have trouble over-hearing. In retrospect, it was likely confirmation of Cousseran's arrival. Hours later, after we received confirmation from other sources that included the Israeli embassy and the local "al-Hayat" correspondent (who had both heard from French NEA A/S equivalent Jean Felix-Paganon), the Syria desk officer finally confirmed to us that Cousseran was in Damascus.

¶4. (C) The surprise, disappointment, and even outrage over this visit among Lebanese observers in Paris was underscored by the local "al-Hayat" correspondent, who is widely regarded as a mouthpiece for the French government. She related that French ambassador to Beirut Bernard Emie, whom she counts as a close friend from his days at the Presidency, told her immediately before his return to post that no decision had been taken to send Cousseran to Damascus and he doubted such a decision was imminent. When the "al-Hayat" correspondent started to see the reports coming out of Beirut that Cousseran was on his to Syria, she reached out to Felix-Paganon, who readily provided confirmation and the lengthy rationale that she reported July 18 (ref B).

¶5. (C) Comment: We are scheduled to receive a readout on July 24 from Felix-Paganon on Cousseran's latest mission. The Quai's dissembling on Cousseran's trip to Damascus is unsettling, especially at a time when Washington and Paris are in close cooperation and contacts are occurring at a senior level. We prefer to think that the virtual absence of mid-level interlocutors and the hyper-caution of the desk officers concerned had more to do with this contretemps than malevolence. Nonetheless, the French engagement with Syria raises many questions about how they intend to pursue what is already a very ambiguous and ill-defined process to help the Lebanese get out of the political trap in which they find themselves. Based on our discussions with the French and after comparing notes with other diplomats following Lebanon, one of the key French motivations was ensuring the Syrians remain "well-behaved" in terms of not allowing further violence (including attacks against UNIFIL) or assassinations during this sensitive period. It is equally clear that the French want to

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placate the Syrians without inadvertently starting a negotiation over the next president of Lebanon. What is less certain, however, is the degree to which part of that strategy includes what is alleged to be Felix-Paganon's desire to meet Syrian objections over the international tribunal partially by pressing for a suspension of efforts to set up the tribunal at least until the investigative commission issues its report. This has not yet come up in official discussions here.

¶6. (C) Comment continued: As noted above, if the French have a clear conception of the way forward, it is not always evident given what our MFA interlocutors acknowledge is a great deal of improvisation by FM Kouchner. The MFA has confirmed that it has shared no written paper or synthetic conception of what might move things along with the Lebanese participants following Celle Saint-Cloud. Still there is confidence that the "terrain" will be sufficiently prepared prior to Kouchner's return to Beirut for the next gathering of the Lebanese factions, though it is unclear exactly how and how quickly. Cousseran's Damascus visit has doubtless scrambled things for some of the Lebanese participants. We note that the Quai privately tells us that the July 28 date for "Celle Saint-Cloud bis" is entirely notional at this stage. One thing that has so far happened as promised is that Cousseran did not head straight from Damascus to Beirut, as many predicted, but is on his way to Cairo and, we hear from the Quai, Je ddah. So far, at least, the French are true to their determination not to restart a "shuttle" between Damascus and Beirut.

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